

Event report

# WHAT'S THE FUTURE FOR LONDON'S VCS INFRASTRUCTURE?

## – A discussion for funders & investors in London

Learning from Funders

16.09.2014

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HOSTED BY BUZZACOTT LLP

**Buzzacott**  
CHARTERED ACCOUNTANTS

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VENUE

Buzzacott LLP  
130 Wood Street  
London  
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There is a growing concern that the challenging financial environment that boroughs and others are working within is putting at risk the future of both local and regional support services. This meeting therefore provided an opportunity for members to reflect on and consider what the future shape of London's VCS infrastructure might be.

David Warner, London Funders, Chair, noted how this topic has been raised regularly by members in London Funders forums over the last year. David emphasized that the discussion would be an opportunity for people to be open and honest about their experiences, emphasizing that the meeting would be following the Chatham House Rule to encourage discussion and learning.

The meeting consisted of one speaker followed by broad open conversation, which is summarised into key themes below.

**Neil Cleveley, NAVCA** introduced NAVCA (National Association for Voluntary and Community Action), the national voice of local support and development organisations in England. Neil briefed the group on the Independent Commission on the future of local infrastructure. This Independent Commission was launched by NAVCA on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 and has examined existing local voluntary and community infrastructure and the challenges and opportunities it is likely to face in the coming years. The final report will be launched in early 2015. More information can be found [here](#).

Neil gave a background to the Commission, and the group discussed the questions of how to assess impact and how to establish quality and the role of relationships within this. There has been an trend towards more 'transactional' relationships with more contracts rather than grants although it is not clear whether ultimately the flexibility of grant giving could lead to a more effective delivery.

Within the research, the Independent Commission talked to both small charities and also the infrastructure organisations about their challenges. The findings include:

- General unease and negativity
- Concern about the increased 'marketisation' seen with demand led funding where infrastructure has to compete with private organisations.
- Relationship with funders. A mix of contract and grant funding
- Very short term views - such a degree of uncertainty that gives less time to consider future strategy. The role of the CVS in a leadership role is diminished. Not able to diagnose the needs of the organisations in advance as need to step back and check what they need.

Neil also outlined the [NAVCA quality award](#), where infrastructure bodies would have a measure to check themselves against.

## Open discussion

### Current concerns

- While some areas don't have enough infrastructure in place, other areas overlap. Some areas are doing a good job whereas others have complications. The group discussed possibilities of how the support could be divided more consistently, but looked at ways that the 'marketisation' model hasn't worked.
- There is an increasing amount of delivery in local CVS'. Where there is a big contract and local services, large national charities come in and win contracts – increasingly only the strong can survive. The focus should be Infrastructure having a role in supporting the small local charities rather than taking on the service delivery. Trust is very important and if a CVS can bid against its members that could be difficult.
- CVS' are not always very user friendly and several examples were given where small local groups had not even heard of their local CVS. The term CVS was also noted as being confusing. The CVS could potentially become a club for those who have already heard of it.
- To what extent are CVS' & Volunteer Centres keeping up with the changing world. Some services are no longer being provided and many people go online to find volunteer work. The simple brokerage role may be done elsewhere now.

### What is the funders role?

- It is difficult for funders to know what support they should be providing. Some CVS organisations are doing an excellent job, but should their role be dictated by the funder? Should funders take more leadership? Where infrastructure services approach a funder for support with delivering services, should funders take control and say no?
- Taking leadership can be positive where it is in the community interest. Some argued that this directive should be taken by elected bodies, it is their place
- The group discussed providing funding to infrastructure organisations, but with guidelines for how they are expected to behave.

### What should an infrastructure body provide?

- The group discussed how infrastructure should be defined and what local, national and regional outcomes are required. It's important to pinpoint the characteristics of good infrastructure. Is it the building that is important or the services?
- Some core functions were noted – leadership, voice and influence to create a space for organisations to speak and to help them achieve their aims. The Commission is considering this question and is looking at different important characteristics.

- The NAVCA quality award was suggested as one method of achieving an awareness of quality within an infrastructure body.
- The provision of different services such as community accountancy services can often be important. Law, accountancy and business planning services can sometimes be gained through personal skills rather than the CVS it comes down to how 'good' the service is that is being offered.
- It's essential that the organisation is trusted by both funders and by their members. They need to be clear with their members, show leadership and encourage good behaviour.
- Discussion as to whether infrastructure organisations should be delivering services. It can be appropriate to 'plug the gaps' where necessary. However, the focus should be on supporting local charities to fulfil that role and compete with the larger charities.

### **Moving forwards**

- The value of taking a step back to see what services are needed to fill a gap in London, and where there is duplication in other areas. Also better communication between areas – perhaps a service or solution can be offered in another infrastructure organisation in a different borough. If not funded to do everything, can put people in the right direction.
- Pan – London services. This could create tensions if not all are involved. Also it is very important to hold onto collective learning.
- The group discussed whether funders should stick to local authority arrangements or consider other models e.g. using a successful centre to run another CVS and employ local development works. Local knowledge is important but the management doesn't have to be local. The Commission will comment as to what that could mean locally and nationally and whether this could be further complicated by devolution.
- Where CVS' are not always that user friendly, work could be done to standardise the outputs. Also standardise the website. How to bring in cultural change to increase online support for some services and free up face to face support. Also make sure that organisations know who you are. It is important to get the leaders on board.
- The group discussed how directive to be in terms of dictating who the infrastructure organisation should actually benefit. Funders need to be better at saying what we actually want and what our expectations are.
- It is very difficult to measure the impact of infrastructure services and attribution of outcomes. Need to look more strategically.
- How to move this conversation forward? If look afresh in London, need to consider how we might do that, what questions should be asked and who should be involved. Every borough is struggling with individual challenges, but important to look at the big picture at what we want London to have. An increased willingness in boroughs to consider sub-regional/ cross boundary work to ensure the community is getting some resources.

The group agreed that this topic is complex; however it is becoming increasingly evident that a strategic view of London's infrastructure needs to be taken. A key theme to the conversation was to what extent funders should be directive in this change and in ensuring the quality of the existing infrastructure. The findings of the Independent Commission on the future of local infrastructure will be a useful contribution to this conversation, and London Funders will support members to facilitate conversations and to shape future action. David thanked the audience for attending and for the quality of the conversation.

## Participants

Kate	<b>Sawdy</b>	Big Lottery Fund
Jaishree	<b>Mistry</b>	Charity Bank
Erik	<b>Mesel</b>	John Lyon's Charity
Monica	<b>Needs</b>	London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
Lisa	<b>Charalambous</b>	London Borough of Camden
Kiran	<b>Patel</b>	London Borough of Camden
Sian	<b>Penner</b>	London Borough of Hackney
Malcolm	<b>John</b>	London Borough of Harrow
Brian	<b>Partridge</b>	London Borough of Havering
Winston	<b>Castello</b>	London Borough of Lewisham
Angus	<b>Lyon</b>	London Borough of Southwark
Maxine	<b>Quintyne- Kolaru</b>	London Councils
Neil	<b>Cleeveley</b>	NAVCA ( <b>Speaker</b> )
Sally	<b>Bagwell</b>	New Philanthropy Capital
Hamid	<b>Vaghefian</b>	sported
Ciaran	<b>Rafferty</b>	The City Bridge Trust
Jerry	<b>Hill</b>	The Social Investment Business

## In attendance

Becky Green	London Funders
David Warner	London Funders (Chair)

With thanks to Buzzacott LLP for their support in hosting this meeting.